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Governor
Benjamin Smith

ADDRESS BY COLLIER COBB

November 15, 1911

PRESENTATION OF PORTRAIT

OF

Governor Benjamin Smith

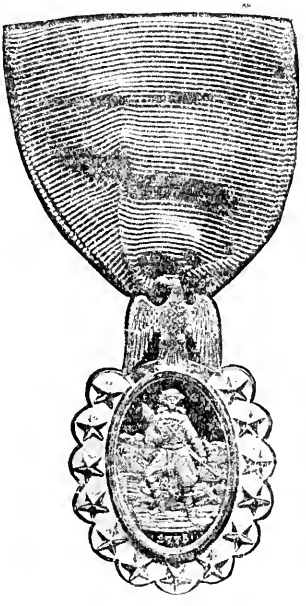
To the State of North Carolina

IN THE

Hall of the House of Representatives, at Raleigh
November 15, 1911

BY THE

North Carolina Society of the Sons of the Revolution



Address by

COLLIER COBB

Professor of Geology in the University of North Carolina,
a Member of the Society

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PROGRAMME OF PUBLIC EXERCISES

November 15, 1911

MEETING CALLED TO ORDER: By Hon. J. Bryan Grimes, President of the Society of the Sons of the Revolution.

PRAYER: By the Rev. Robert Brent Drane, D.D., of Edenton, Chaplain of the Society.

INTRODUCTION OF THE ORATOR: By President Grimes.

ADDRESS: The Career of Governor Benjamin Smith, by Prof. Collier Cobb, of the University of North Carolina, a member of the Society.

ACCEPTANCE OF THE PORTRAIT: By His Excellency, William W. Kitchin, Governor of North Carolina.

BENEDICTION: By The Rev. Dr. Drane.

ADDRESS

Addressing Governor Kitchin, Professor Cobb said:

May it Please Your Excellency:

On behalf of the North Carolina Society of the Sons of the Revolution, I present through you to the State of North Carolina the portrait of Benjamin Smith, patriot, legislator, soldier, statesman, and philanthropist; builder of highways and of fortifications; conservationist and drainer of swamps; opener of waterways; believer in education for every child within the State, and the first benefactor of the University; Grand Master of Masons; Governor of North Carolina one hundred years before his time, and dreamer of dreams which you, sir, now help to make come true.

LIFE AND PUBLIC SERVICES OF BENJAMIN SMITH.

Benjamin Smith's education began more than a hundred years before he was born, for he came of a race of men who did things. He was descended from Sir John Yeamans, from old King Roger Moore, and his grandmother, Lady Sabina Smith, was the daughter of Thomas Smith, second Landgrave of his name in South Carolina. The father of our present subject was Colonel Thomas Smith, of South Carolina. So far as is known no relationship existed between him and his wife, whose name (as just stated) was also Smith. Thomas Smith, the first Landgrave, had seen rice cultivated in Madagascar; and one day, in 1696, when a sea captain, an old friend of his, sailed into Charleston Harbor from Madagascar, Thomas Smith got from him a bag of rice seed. This was carefully sown in a wet place in Smith's garden in Charleston. It grew, and the two Carolinas were changed into a land of great rice plantations. His great-grandson, Benjamin Smith, was later owner of the best rice plantation in North Carolina, a portion of the original grant to Landgrave Smith, who tried to establish settlements on the

Cape Fear River in 1690. Also to be counted among his close kindred were the Bees and Grimkés, of South Carolina, and the Rhetts, who changed their name from Smith to that of their grandmother, Catherine Rhett, whose family in South Carolina had become extinct. Benjamin Smith thus came of a breed possessing ability, means, and position. The William Smith who introduced the culture of cotton into Virginia in 1621 is said to have been of the same stock.

While the public acts and many details of the private life of Benjamin Smith may be gathered from the records of his time, both State and National, and from the rather voluminous correspondence of his distinguished contemporaries, the date of his birth and the manner and place of his burial have frequently been brought into question. The weight of authority favors January 10, 1756, as his birthday, and January 10, 1826, his seventieth birthday, as the date of his death. Still there are those who contend that he was born in 1750, and that he died on the 10th of February, 1829. But a contemporary newspaper, the *Raleigh Register,* of February 14, 1826, has a notice of his death as having occurred recently at Smithville.

We know nothing, however, concerning his childhood and youth, but he must have received careful training, for we are told that, "While still young, just twenty-one years of age, he served as aide-de-camp of General Washington in the dangerous but masterly retreat from Long Island after the defeat of the American Army in August, 1776. He behaved with conspicuous gallantry in the brilliant action in which Moultrie, in 1779, drove the British from Port Royal Island, and checked for a time the invasion of South Carolina. A Charleston paper says: 'He gave on many occasions such various proofs of activity and distinguished bravery as to merit the approbation of his impartial country.'" Yet during the siege of Charleston, in 1780, a blunder of Smith's brought about the premature surrender of the city on the 12th of May. "Mr. Smith sent a letter to his

wife by Mr. Rutlege, who was taking to the Governor a communication that had been confided to him orally, with the strictest injunction that no written communication be taken from the garrison. A letter addressed by a friend to his wife under assurance that it was only a family letter, Mr. Rutledge unwarily considered it no violation of his instructions. He was captured soon after he left the town and printed copies of the letter were next day thrown into the garrison in unloaded bombshells, and most unaccountably, through a secret agency, dispersed through all parts of the town in printed handbills. The letter plainly told that the garrison must soon surrender, that their provisions were expended, and Lincoln only prevented from capitulating by a point of etiquette. From this time hope deserted the garrison, while the reanimated efforts of the enemy showed their zeal revived." Lincoln surrendered the fort, and Charleston, with its stores, its advantages, and the army that defended it, fell into the hands of the British commander. Smith probably hastened the surrender just a little, but he did not cause it; for historians are generally agreed that Lincoln should have fled and saved his army soon after Clinton began engirdling the city about the 1st of April, and before the British fleet a week later ran by Fort Moultrie and entered the harbor.

In 1783 we find Benjamin Smith in the General Assembly of North Carolina, representing Brunswick County in the Senate. He was a member of the Constitutional Convention of 1788, that declined to accept the Federal Constitution, and in that body did all in his power to secure its adoption, since he was an ardent Federalist. He was a member of the convention that adopted the Constitution in 1789, and was on the committee that prepared the amendments which North Carolina proposed to the Constitution of the United States. He had some support for the Senatorship in 1789, but Benjamin Hawkins was elected. This Legislature of 1789 chartered the University of North Carolina, and Smith

was named among the most eminent men of the State composing the first board of trustees. At the first meeting of the board, on the 18th of December, 1789, Colonel Smith offered to the University warrants for 20,000 acres of land in Tennessee that he had received as pay for his distinguished services in the Revolution, and he handed over the warrants at the second meeting of the board in 1790. He remained a trustee of the University until 1824, and took great pride in presiding over the meetings of the board during his term as Governor of the State.

The warrants Colonel Smith gave were for land located in Obion County, in the extreme northwest part of Tennessee. By the Treaty of Hopewell in 1795 the United States ceded this territory to the Chickasaw Indians. In 1810 the most terrific earthquake that has ever visited the interior of our country turned portions of this region into lakelets, and a large part of the University's tract is now occupied by Reelfoot Lake, the scene of the night-rider raid of a few years ago. It was not until twenty-five years afterward that a sale was effected, realizing $14,000 for the University. Smith Hall, built for a library half a century after the gift of the land warrants and today occupied by the Law School, the most attractive building on the campus, commemorates the munificence of Colonel Smith.

In 1791 Smith again became a member of the Assembly, and except for the three years, 1801, 1802 and 1803, he continued in the State Senate until his election as Governor in the fall of 1810, and he was again in the Senate in 1816. He was Speaker of the Senate from 1795 to 1799. In 1800 he was defeated for the Speakership by Joseph Riddick, and in the next election he was defeated for the Senatorship by William Wingate, a Jeffersonian Democrat. In that day personal conflicts growing out of political differences were by no means unusual, and there is a tradition of a duel that Smith fought with Thomas Leonard, a political opponent, in which the General was seriously wounded. The ball

could not be extracted, and the Governor carried it in his thigh to the end of his days.

During his career as a legislator he served on many important committees, and he always voted as a strict partisan. He favored the making of roads, the building of causeways, the draining of bog lands, the foresting of dunes, and the keeping open of rivers and creeks at their falls for the free passage of fish. As a Member of the Assembly he bitterly opposed the founding of the city of Raleigh, and the removal of the capital from Fayetteville and again from New Bern.

In contemplation of a war with France, or of a second conflict with England, while General Washington was still President, Colonel Smith was made Brigadier-General of Militia, 1796. When a struggle with France seemed imminent, during the presidency of John Adams in 1797, the entire militia force of Brunswick County, officers and men, roused to enthusiasm by a speech General Smith made them, volunteered to follow his lead in the service of their country. In 1810, when trouble with England was culminating, he was again made Brigadier-General of his county forces.

In that same year he was elected Governor of North Carolina, and in his message to the General Assembly, November 20, 1811, he recommended the adoption of a penitentiary system, and appealed for a reform of the too sanguinary criminal code of the State. He also advised encouraging "domestic manufactures employing those persons who are unable or unfit to till the soil," the improving of the militia, and the establishment of public schools. In recommending the schools he said: "Too much attention can not be paid to the all-important subject of education. In despotic governments, where the supreme power is in the possession of a tyrant or divided amongst an hereditary aristocracy (generally corrupt and wicked), the ignorance of the people is a security to their rulers; but in a free government, where the offices and honors of the State are open to all, the superiority of their political privileges should be infused into every

citizen from their earliest infancy, so as to produce an enthusiastic attachment to their own country, and ensure a jealous support of their own constitution, laws, and government, to the total exclusion of all foreign influence or partiality. A certain degree of education should be placed within the reach of every child in the State; and I am persuaded a plan may be formed upon economical principles that would extend this boon to the poor of every neighborhood, at an expense trifling beyond expectation, when compared with the incalculable benefits from such a philanthropic and politic system." Excusing the rhetoric, this might have been written a century later.

Upon retiring from the gubernatorial office he entered upon the carrying out of certain engineering plans which he had advocated as legislator and Governor for the improvement of conditions within the State. He stood for the best of what has characterized each and every administration from the time of Governors Vance and Jarvis to the days of Aycock and Glenn and of Your Excellency. He lived just one hundred years before his time. He could not long remain out of politics, and in 1816 his neighbors returned him to the State Senate. General Smith was a zealous Mason, and during his prime was for three years, from 1808 to 1811, Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of North Carolina.

Up to 1792 there were no homes in the neighborhood of Fort Johnston, near the mouth of the Cape Fear River, and Mr. Joshua Potts, of Wilmington, who made the first movement toward establishing a town there, has given us an interesting account of the settlement of Smithville in a manuscript that has come down to us, and published in 1904 by the University of North Carolina in James Sprunt Historical Monograph No. 4, pp. 86-90. Mr. Potts has told us how he and certain of his friends in 1790 undertook to lay off a town there and obtain a charter. Their plan was unexpectedly opposed in the Legislature by Colonel Smith, and the charter for the town of "Nashton," as they purposed

calling the place, was defeated. A year after the defeat of the bill at Fayetteville, General Smith's neighbors who favored the bill determined that he should not be sent to the Assembly unless he would do his best to have an act passed for the intended purpose. General Smith accepted the conditions, was elected, and made good his word. The act was passed at New Bern in 1792. General Smith, when he returned from the Assembly, told his friends that on his making a motion and offering the bill for the act, "Mr. Macon or some other respectable member made an observation that many applications had been acted upon for different towns in the State, but that few, if any of them, had succeeded; that the said worthy member said, 'As General Smith has applied in behalf of this petty town, it should be called Smithville, as if by way of derision to the applicant, should the town (like many others) not succeed.' "

Benjamin Smith married Miss Sarah Rhett Dry, daughter of Colonel William Dry, a man of ability, excellent education, and rare accomplishments, and a member of the King's Council. She was also a direct descendant from Cromwell's admiral, Robert Blake. Both she and General Smith inherited large estates. We learn much of their manner of life and their generous hospitality from the diary of General Joseph Gardner Swift, of New York, first graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point, who in his younger days enjoyed intimate association with General Smith. Swift, a young second lieutenant in the corps of engineers, "was sent to Wilmington in 1804 to examine the harbor of Cape Fear, and to report a plan of defense therefor, and also to direct the execution of a contract with General Benjamin Smith, of Belvidere, to construct a battery at the site of old Fort Johnston, in Smithville, of a material called 'tapia.' " He gave to the United States Government ten acres of land on Bald Head, or Smith's Island, which he owned, on which to build the lighthouse at the mouth of the

Cape Fear River. He constructed the causeway from Wilmington across Eagles Island.

"As he advanced in years," to use the words of Dr. Battle, "Governor Smith lost his health by high living and his fortune by too generous suretyship. He became irascible and prone to resent fancied slights. His tongue became venomous to opponents. He once spoke with undeserved abusiveness of Judge Alfred Moore, and the insult was avenged by one of the members of the Assembly from Brunswick, Judge Moore's son Maurice." General Swift has given us in his "Memoirs" an account of this duel, which was fought on June 28, 1805, just over in South Carolina, near to the ocean side, where then stood the Boundary House, the line running through the center of the entrance hall and main passageway. Captain Moore was attended by his cousin, Major Duncan Moore, while General Smith's second was General Swift himself. Dr. Andrew Scott attended as surgeon for both combatants. At the second fire General Smith received his antagonist's ball in his side and fell. Dr. Scott, aided by Dr. Griffin, took the General to Smithville by water, while General Swift hastened to Belvidere, and conveyed Mrs. Smith in a chair to Smithfield through a storm of lightning and rain. The ball lodged near the General's left shoulder-blade, and it (or the bullet fired by Leonard years before) was the means of identifying Smith's ashes many years later when his remains were removed to the burial ground of St. James Church, Wilmington.

General Smith's great burden of debt was due to the defalcation of Colonel Reed, collector of the port of Wilmington, whose surety he was. It was to discharge this liability that General Smith had contracted to build the tapia work at Fort Johnston. General Swift has told us how this tapia was prepared from equal parts of lime, raw shells and sand, and water sufficient to form a paste or batter. All the engineering work in which the old hero engaged was undertaken to discharge debts, and it is sad to relate that in his old age

he was arrested by the attorney of the University, who, Smith alleged, was his personal enemy, and held for a security debt, "but on learning the fact he was released by the Trustees with promptness."

Besides the home at Belvidere, Governor Smith at one time owned Orton, which came down to him from his ancestor, Roger Moore, being originally the home of his kinsman, Maurice Moore, grandson of Sir John Yeamans. Mrs. Smith's flower garden was such an attractive place that Dr. Griffin, dying of yellow fever in Wilmington, asked that he be buried there. The Isabella grape, highly esteemed by us for its fine flavor, was introduced to North Carolina from Mrs. Smith's garden where it grew from a cutting, the gift of a sea captain who had received some kindness at her hands. General Swift visited his old friend, General Smith, at Orton in 1818, and found him greatly depressed by his debts, Mrs. Smith "evincing a well-balanced serenity to cheer her husband." Swift returned to Wilmington, where he "found it a fruitless essay to liquidate the large claims of the General's creditors."

This man, of rare personal charm, of high character, and of openhearted and openhanded hospitality, became involved in such pecuniary difficulties that he was actually imprisoned for debt; and at the time of his death, in 1826, some of his creditors resorted to the unusual method, though allowed by the law of that day, of withholding his body from burial until his friends could meet the demands of the creditors. The deputies set to watch the body were lured away temporarily to partake of refreshments, and when they returned the coffin and its contents had disappeared. Friends had taken it out on the river to the old graveyard on the site of St. Phillip's Church, then a ruin of old Brunswick town, where in the dead of night they gave the body of their comrade Christian burial. A story, probably originating with the careless watchers, that the coffin had been taken out on the river and in the darkness committed to its waters by the

negroes who were trusted to row the boat, gained some credence; but what is less probable: that devoted friends would thus leave his body to slaves, or that they would let the story pass as a probable means of concealing his last resting place?

In 1853 their old friend, General Swift, caused to be erected over the grave of General and Mrs. Smith in the old Brunswick cemetery a marble slab on which was inscribed: "In memory of that Excellent Lady, Sarah Rhett Dry Smith, who died the 21st of November, 1821, aged 59 years. Also of her husband, Benjamin Smith of Belvidere, once Governor of North Carolina, who died January, 1826, aged 70."

ACCEPTANCE

In a graceful speech, on behalf of the State, Governor Kitchin thanked the Society for this gift of the portrait of Governor Smith, and expressed his gratification upon learning that there had been manifested in North Carolina a century ago such interest in public education and other beneficent measures for the upbuilding of the State and the good of its people. It is a source of sincere regret that Governor Kitchin's speech of acceptance, having been delivered without manuscript or notes, cannot be reproduced here. As is always the case with that gifted orator, his remarks were a source of entertainment and interest to his hearers, and it would gratify the Society to be able to place them in full before its members and friends who were not so fortunate as to be present on that interesting occasion.

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